

Comparing Religions: A World History Unit

Presented by: Christian D. Nokkentved, Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy
2 March, 2012

The unit allows students to explore the five to eight religions of the world with the most adherents, though the format lends itself to including any number of religions. The set of religions we choose in any one year depends on what else is planned. Typically we begin with Hinduism, since it is the oldest still practiced religion and we follow with Buddhism since its founder was first a Hindu. Remaining in East Asia we move on to Confucianism and Taoism, both sometimes done as one under the rubric of Chinese Religion. While Judaism is fundamental to Christianity, Islam and Western Culture, we do not always include it because so few people, in relation to the other religions, practice Judaism. Of the West Asian religions we always include Christianity and Islam. If we had more time it would be good to include others like Zoroastrianism. In all cases students only explore the fundamental or core beliefs of each religion in their ancient iterations.

The format of the study is quite straightforward. Students are divided into groups of three or four and they will remain in those groups for the duration of the unit. In the introduction to the unit it is made quite clear to the students that the purpose is to approach these religions as historians (not as disciples); i.e. we are looking at what people in the past have written about their beliefs. The inspiration for those texts is not germane for this work. The class is asked to find the answers to the same three questions for each religion in the selections of the sacred writings in the assigned text. The questions are: 1) What is the nature of the divine? 2) What is the nature of humankind? 3) What are the major virtues and vices? One could add additional questions about the source of knowledge or the place of humanity in the universe, for example. It is not enough for the students to find an answer to each of the questions they must also find relevant quotes from the texts to support their ideas. In class each group is asked to assemble their answers and to develop lists of attributes of the divine and of humans and to list the major virtues and vices. The teacher then goes around to each group soliciting one attribute at a time and writing it on the board. (The visual representation of a period's work is important for student understanding.) It is often necessary to discuss with students what a given text means or what an attribute indicates about a set of beliefs. It is usually necessary for the teacher to show how it all hangs together towards the end of the discussion of a given religion. We typically dedicate one or two seventy minute class sessions to each religion (no, that is not nearly enough, but that is what we have).

When we have gone through all the religions planned, we then organize a "religion fair". Each group is given a religion to present. (It is important not to make this assignment until the end, or students only listen to the religion their group is responsible for.) Each group makes a poster which the students then present on the day of the fair and which is attached to the wall in an area where all posters can be accessible to the students. (The content of the poster is listed on the hand-out below.) There is usually time for students to wander around looking at the posters. Lastly each student is asked to write a short paper (three to five pages) on, for example, the common idea of virtue in East and West Asian religions. Again the specifics are listed in the hand-out below.

STUDENT HAND-OUTS

TOPICS IN WORLD STUDIES

SEMESTER I

RELIGION POSTER PRESENTATIONS

The poster you do for the religion your group is specializing in needs to include the following information:

1. Brief answers to the three questions we have been studying (remember to include quotations and citations); i.e.:
 - a. What is the nature of the Divine?
 - b. What is the nature of humankind?
 - c. What are the virtues and vices?
2. Some of the major past and present leaders of the religion.
3. Some of the major symbols of the religions (at least three).
4. Something about where, when and by whom (remember this is a history project, so we need the names of historical persons) the religion was founded.
5. The major divisions of the religion today.
6. A brief description of the religion's geographic spread today.

RELIGION PAPER

Please write a three to five page paper on the common idea of virtue shared by both East and West Asian religions. Based on the sacred writings of at least three of the religions we have studied from both East and West Asia; discuss this common idea of virtue. This is not meant to be a comparative paper. Instead focus on what they all believe; i.e. synthesize the basic idea of virtue citing the scriptures of the three (or more) religions you chose and any other material if you wish. (Please do not quote dictionaries or encyclopedias.)

Other topics could also be chosen including comparative ones. For example, comparing the various beliefs about the nature of human kind can be a fruitful assignment.

RELIGION POSTER PRESENTATION ASSESSMENT

NAMES: _____

1. What is the nature of the Divine? _____

2. What is the nature of humankind? _____

3. What are the virtues and vices? _____

* * * * *

4. Some of the major leaders of the religion. _____

5. Some of the major symbols of the religions (at least three). _____

6. Something about where, when and by whom the religion was founded. _____

7. The major divisions of the religion today. _____

8. A brief description of the religion's geographic spread today. _____

9. Aesthetics. _____

10. Presentation _____

Comments:

STANDARDS

STATE GOAL 16: Understand events, trends, individuals and movements shaping the history of Illinois, the United States and other nations.

Why This Goal Is Important: George Santayana said "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." In a broader sense, students who can examine and analyze the events of the past have a powerful tool for understanding the events of today and the future. They develop an understanding of how people, nations, actions and interactions have led to today's realities. In the process, they can better define their own roles as participating citizens.

- Classical civilizations from 1000 BCE to 500 CE

And:

16.A.5a Analyze historical and contemporary developments using methods of historical inquiry (pose questions, collect and analyze data, make and support inferences with evidence, report findings).

16.A.5b Explain the tentative nature of historical interpretations.

18.A.4 Analyze the influence of cultural factors including customs, traditions, language, media, art and architecture in developing pluralistic societies.

18.C.4a Analyze major cultural exchanges of the past (e.g., Colombian exchange, the Silk Road, the Crusades).

National Standards

Era 3, Standard 3: How major religions and large-scale empires arose in the Mediterranean basin, China, and India, 500 BCE-300 CE.

3.B. Consider multiple perspectives.

D. Draw comparisons across eras and regions in order to define enduring issues.

4. F. Support interpretations with historical evidence.

RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

BOOKS:

Champion, Selwyn Gurney and Dorothy Short, eds. *The World's Great Religions: An Anthology of Sacred Texts*. Mineola, N. Y.: Dover Publications, Inc., 2003. [Originally published in 1952 by the Beacon Press.]

Deangelis, Gary D. and Warren G. Frisina, eds. *Teaching the Daode Jing*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

De Groot, J.J.M. *Religion in China: Universism: A Key to the Study of Taoism and Confucianism*. New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1912. [This, very helpful volume, is available on-line.]

Novak, Philip, ed. *The World's Wisdom: Sacred Texts of the World's Religions*. New York: HarperCollins Pub., 1994.

Richey, Jeffrey L., ed. *Teaching Confucianism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

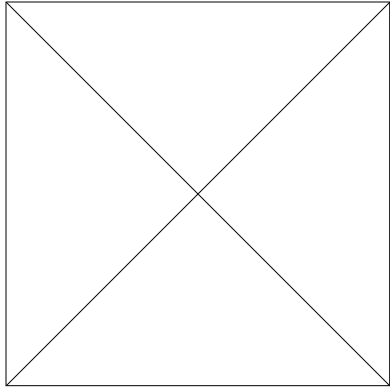
Smith, Huston. *The Religions of Man*. 50th anniversary edition. New York : HarperOne, 2009. [Originally published as *The Religions of Man* by Harper and Brothers in 1958. There are a number of later editions, often with an altered title and it is available as an e-book.]

In addition there are a number of useful web sites, especially:

Ancient History Sourcebook. <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/asbook.asp>. This site is very useful and i.a. contains full length translations of ancient, including religious, texts.



A portion of “Story of the Flood” from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*



Chr. D. Nokkentved, Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy